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ABSTRACT

Recent research on the role of personal space has demonstrated the effects of violating or not violating a spatial norm on the perceived persuasiveness, credibility, and attractiveness of the message source. The persuasive impact of personal space violations has been difficult to interpret because of the failure to effectively manipulate source characteristics. Violations of personal distancing expectations also serve as a subtle form of distraction in the persuasive transaction. To resolve some of the research problems, studies might adopt interactional distances rather than imposing structured interactional distances on the subject. In terms of reward, problems associated with physical attractiveness seem to indicate the impossibility of truly finding the extremes of physical attractiveness. Finally, it is necessary to discover how distraction can be measured. (DF)

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VIOLATIONS AND PERSUASIVE EFFECTS

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VIOLATIONS AND PERSUASIVE EFFECTS

The role of personal space has recently become the focal point for a series of studies investigating the interpersonal mode of persuasion. This research is based on the demonstrated effects that violating or not violating a spatial norm have on the perceived persuasiveness, credibility, and/or attraction of the message source. Although personal space violations have been demonstrated to produce a variety of reactions and perceptions, the persuasive impact of such manipulations has been difficult to interpret. This paper suggests that at least two reasons may be forwarded to account for this difficulty: varying methods of manipulating distancing and failure to effectively manipulate source characteristics. Further, it is suggested that violations of interpersonal distancing expectations serve as a subtle form of distraction in the persuasive transaction. Finally, problems associated with personal spacing and persuasion research are discussed.

A review of the literature on nonverbal communication and persuasion reveals that very little research has been undertaken in the area of interpersonal distancing. Lately, however, Stacks and Burgoon (1979a, 1979b, 1980) and Stacks (1980) have pursued a line of research directed at the effect of violating interpersonal distancing expectations on a source's persuasiveness and perceptions of that source's attraction and credibility. The logic underlying this approach is based on a model proposed by Burgoon and Jones (1976) and later modified by Burgoon and her associates (Burgoon, 1978; Burgoon, Stacks, & Woodall, 1979; Stacks & Burgoon, 1979b, 1980). This model proposes that violations of interpersonal distancing expectations lead to positive or negative effects depending upon the characteristics of the initiator of the deviation from the expected distance, the direction of that deviation, and the amount of the deviation. For those individuals perceived as being rewarding (i.e., physically attractive, status, power) or

nonrewarding (i.e., lack of physical attraction, low status, low power), different results will be obtained, depending upon the maintenance of or deviation from the expected distance. Stacks and Burgoon (1979b, 1980) further suggest that such deviations distract the receiver from counterarguing the message.

It has been argued that the ability of a message to be influential is dependent upon the probability of its being received, understood, and discredited by a receiver (Weyer, 1974). Distracting the receiver, it has been argued, disrupts the process of discrediting (counterarguing) the message, thus enhancing the message's effect. Stacks and Burgoon (1979a, 1979b, 1980) argue that violating interpersonal distancing expectations acts as a subtle, yet effective distractor. The distraction effect, however, is mediated by the reward valence of the initiator of the deviation. If the initiator is rewarding, any deviation, up to a point labeled, "threat threshold," should produce more persuasion than if no deviation was to occur. This effect is predicated upon the assumption that the receiver will be distracted from the message by perceptions of increased personal involvement in the interaction, possible attributions of quasi-courtship behavior, and a reinforcement of the reward value of the source. Since the distance manipulation is less salient than the message, receivers should attune primarily to the message and not the distraction. Both the nature of the distractor and the focus of attention have been attributed to mediate the effect of distracting receivers from messages (e.g., Zimbardo et al, 1970; Baron, Baron, & Miller, 1973). In short, when attention is focused on the distractor, persuasion is inhibited as the learning of arguments is decreased; when attention is focused on the message, persuasion is enhanced. Stacks and Burgoon suggest that receivers maintain a focus on the message when that message is presented by a rewarding deviator, thus enhancing the source's persuasiveness. For the nonrewarding deviator, however, deviations from the expected distance become more pronounced, thus attention is focused on the source of distraction and persuasion is inhibited.

The effect of violating interpersonal distancing expectations has also been demonstrated to produce differing perceptions of source credibility (e.g., Burgoon, 1978; Burgoon, Stacks, & Woodall, 1979; Stacks & Burgoon, 1979a). Generally, rewarding initiators of a deviation have been found to obtain on some credibility dimensions higher ratings than when maintaining the expected distance; nonrewarding initiators, although the effect is not as pronounced, have been found to receive lower ratings on credibility when deviating from rather than maintaining the expected distance. Credibility also mediates the effect of distraction. Research suggests that when receivers are presented messages by a "barely credible" source, they need not counterargue, but merely derogate the source (e.g., Kiesler & Mathog, 1968; Miller & Baron, 1968). This effect is along the line suggested by Festinger and Maccoby (1964) who originally noted that distraction enhances persuasion by inhibiting counterarguing only when the receiver cannot rely on source derogation to reject the message.

As noted, previous research investigating the effects of interpersonal distancing and persuasion is scarce. The problems associated with interpreting those studies that have examined persuasion from this direction, however, make it difficult to synthesize any results. Previous research has relied on differing operationalizations of distancing, and, when explaining the results (which differ from study to study), they were often elaborated on a post hoc basis. In terms of results, Albert and Dabbs (1970) found that a "hostile" persuader obtained less attitude change in close than the average and far distances (distance was operationalized as degrees of comfortableness: uncomfortably close--one to two feet; average--five to six feet; and uncomfortably far--fourteen to fifteen feet). Garner (1972) similarly found less persuasion at an extremely close distance (less than six inches). The problems associated with these two studies include distances closer than or farther than normally accepted "interpersonal" distances and failure to specify characteristics about the

confederate used. Riess (1977) manipulated seated distance and subjects' focus on the persuader. Focus was manipulated via instructions to attend to the status and attractiveness of the persuader. Distance was operationalized as falling within Hall's social-consultative zone (3.5 to 7 feet). Although Riess found no significant effect for distance, a trend was obtained whereby perceived persuasiveness increased as distance increased, but only in the status-focus condition. Mehrabian and Williams (1969) found that subjects, when asked to present a persuasive message, adcpted distances from their "receiver" that were not significantly different. However, when asked to decode a persuasive "message," they found an "immediate" distance (four feet) was decoded as more persuasive than a "nonimmediate" distance (twelve feet). The former being within the accepted interpersonal distance; the latter, however, more toward the inner proxeme of public space.

In terms of explanation, Albert and Dabbs couched their findings in reactance theory, Mehrabian and Williams on the concept of immediacy, Garner on source derogation (although credibility analyses did not support this explanation), and Riess developed a formulation based on impression management. Further confounding any attempt to synthesize these results are the different operationalizations of distance and the actual ranges used. Although these studies used structured interaction distances[1] (in some cases pretested for comfort, in others the "normal" conversational distance), the actual distances used differed greatly: from less than six inches (Garner) to fifteen feet (Albert and Dabbs). Only one study (Riess) operationalized distance as falling with accepted interpersonal distancing norms by using Hall's social-consultative zone. Finally, these studies omitted detailed descriptions of the confederates. Without knowing how physically attractive the confederates were, their social attractiveness, and/or their perceived status, it is not possible to draw sound conclusions about the relationship of distance to persuasion.

One underlying assumption, however, may be made concerning these studies. Almost entirely they may have had subjects' focus of attention on the distractor, the confederate. Mehrabian and Williams' subjects may have inadvertently focused on the persuader via the masks the confederates wore in the decoding study and the fact that the subjects were instructed to imagine a message was being presented rather than an actual message. The finding of immediacy, therefore, may have been an artifact of perceived involvement at four feet which was not perceived at twelve feet. Riess manipulated focus of attention via written instructions in terms of attraction and status. The increased persuasion in the status conditions may be explained as a status inducement and as distance increased, subjects changed their attitudes in the speaker's direction (e.g., Willis, 1966)[2]. Albert and Dabbs found that attention was focused on the source at the close distance, indicating that subjects were focused not on the message but on the distraction. Finally, through the invasion paradigm used by Garner, subjects may have been focused on the source of discomfort, or distraction, via the extremely close distance chosen. These results, when reinterpreted from a distraction paradigm, suggest a consistency: by focusing on the source rather than the message, subjects may have become more resistant to the persuasive message.

More recently, research has attempted to find support for the proposed model of interpersonal distancing violations and distraction. Stacks and Burgoon (1980) found that physically attractive sources, when presenting a belief discrepent message, were more persuasive and served as positive sources of distraction when violating interpersonal distancing expectations; however, they were unable to support the prediction that unattractive sources would produce more resistance to the message when violating the expected distance. Two other studies (Stacks & Burgoon, 1979a; Stacks, 1980) obtained similar results: attractive sources of messages were perceived as more persuasive when deviating

from the expected distance but no support was found for more resistance to the unattractive source's message with deviations. Both studies, however, failed to obtain significant distraction effects. Two possible interpretations could be offered for this lack of support for distraction. First, distraction was not measured properly. Second, the distraction effect may be so subtle as not to be consciously perceived. Stacks and Burgoon argue that for rewarding initiators the effect should be such that the distraction first centers on source characteristics and then the message. That the results did not support the effect for nonrewarding confederates might suggest that a sufficient nonreward condition was not induced. However, two different measures of distraction were used by Stacks (1980): one which measured the distraction in the interaction via a series of semantic differential scales (e.g., comfortable-uncomfortable; distracted-not distracted) and the other which focused on the subject's ability to listen to the arguments via a series of Likert-like statements (e.g., it was easy to listen to the arguments). Stacks found a significant negative correlation between the two measures (-.51), indicating that they were, indeed, measuring different aspects of distraction. Perhaps a better test would be on focus of attention: message or message source. One final distinction between the findings of distractive impact and no distractive impact might be the method employed in operationalizing distance. In their 1980 study, Stacks and Burgoon operationalized distance as the norm as established by the subject from the confederate (e.g., "interactional distance"). In the other two studies, distance was operationalized as the normative distance pretested to occur in group interactions between three people. Perhaps they should have allowed the natural interactional norms to operate rather than imposing a "normative" distance as has other persuasion research. The failure to find an effect for distraction in two of the three studies may also have been an artifact of the interaction. The two studies which failed to obtain significant effects for distraction used three person groups instead of

dyads. It may be that the presence of the third individual mediated the distractive impact of the distancing variable. All three studies, however, did find that attractive sources produced more persuasion by deviating from the expected distance than by maintaining it. Again, all three studies failed to support the prediction that unattractive message sources would foster resistance to their messages by deviating from the expected distance.

One additional problem with the research reported by researchers in interpersonal distancing and persuasion is found in the area of manipulating attraction. Of those studies which have reported the attractiveness of the confederates, most have failed to fairly differentiate the variable. Stacks and Burgoon (1980), for example, were unable to find confederates who were perceived as truly unattractive (attractiveness was defined as natural attractiveness, no cosmetic changes were made). Similarily, they were unable to obtain a main effect for reward (1979a) in one of the group studies. Although Stacks (1980) did obtain significant differences for reward in the follow up study, the distance by reward interactions failed to obtain significance, except for persuasiveness of the source.

The problems associated with the study of violations of interpersonal distancing expectations and persuasion are many. These problems, however, can and should be resolved. Future studies might adopt the interactional distances, as affected by the norms operating in the interaction, rather than imposing structured interactional distances on the subject. In terms of reward, the problems associated with physical attractiveness seem to indicate that we may be unable to truly find the extremes in physical attractiveness. The alternative, to use cosmetic changes, may be unsatisfactory if we want to generalize results to the "normally" attractive individual. Finally, we need to discover how distraction, if it is a viable explanation for the persuasive effects of violating interpersonal distancing expectations, can be measured.

NOTES

[1]A discussion of research paradigms can be found in Stacks and Burgoon (1979b, 1980). It is suggested that three identifiable paradigms are found in persuasion-interpersonal distancing research: structured (norm imposed), invasion (extreme closeness, often six inches or less from the subject), and interactional (norm established by the subject to a seated confederate).

[2]This parallels Stacks and Burgoon's (1979b, 1980) reformulation of the violations model which argues that a rewarding source, in this case as high status, will obtain more persuasiveness with a deviation farther than the expected distance.

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